

# **PETSERI**

ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST INTERESTING CORNERS.



AND AN ACCOUNT OF THE GREAT FIRE OF MAY 24 AND 25, 1939.

PRICE £ 5 TO 5/-

which is to be devoted to a fund to relieve the distress of 2000 peasants rendered homeless, clotheless and possessionless by this GREAT CATASTROPHE.

## AN EARNEST APPEAL TO YOUR CHARITY.

Dear Sir or Madam,

Twenty-one years ago, when the Estonians were fighting for their Independence, the British Government gave them assistance by sending Admiral Sinclair and Admiral Cowan with a naval squadron, which effectively freed them from anxiety of attack by sea.

The Estonian nation has never forgotten this act, and during their courageous period of development, the Estonians have looked towards Great Britain as a kindly big brother. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. British culture is the example the Estonians have always before them. English is the first foreign language (of four) in the schools.

The international situation has made it essential for Estonia to fall into line with the other powers, and a special tax for armaments has had to be introduced.

The recent tragedy in Petseri, which has caused £250,000 damage will make it necessary for the Government to render assistance, for the public are unable to help to any effective degree. The people have risen to the occasion marvellously, but no public fund that could be raised here, even if successful beyond wildest dreams, could ever be large enough to rehouse, clothe and feed the 2000 unhappy victims of the Petseri fire. And if the Government is to do this, and do it, it will, something else must suffer.

Recent events have made the Estonians pause slightly, almost imperceptibly, yet pause.

Your response to my appeal will therefore have a three-fold effect:

- a) Alleviate the terrible suffering of 2000 people.
- b) Assist the Estonian nation; and in so doing,
- c) restore the confidence in Great Britain which may have been shaken.

My object is the modest sum of £500. Of course, I should like much more, but I shall be happy to achieve this.

Please send me what you can. I should like £5, but I shall be satisfied with five shillings.

Please make out your cheques or postal orders to:

The Ronald Seth Petseri Fund,  
and send your donations to:

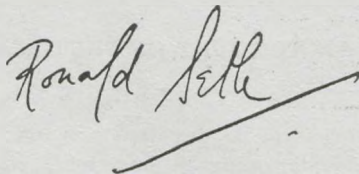
Ronald Seth,  
„Uus Eesti“, Pikk tänn. 40,  
TALLINN, Estonia.

A list of the donors will be published in the columns of this newspaper, whose Directors are so kindly cooperating with me.

I know you will help me, and so maintain the great British tradition of helping those in great distress.

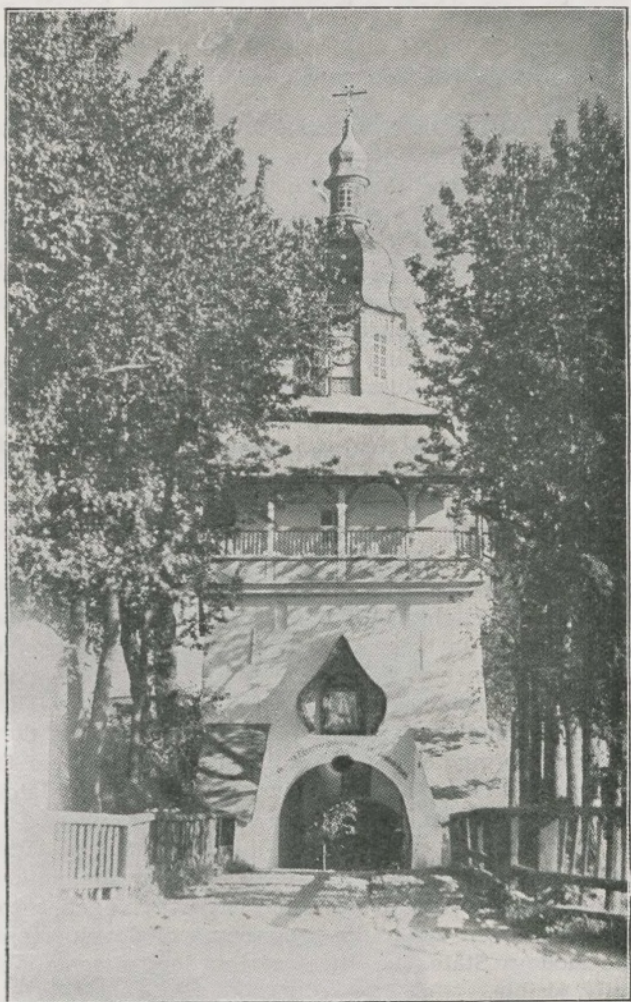
Thanking you in anticipation.

Yours sincerely,



Lecturer in English, the University of Tallinn,  
Author of "Baltic Corner" (Methuen).





*Gateway to the Monastery*

# PETSERI

## ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST INTERESTING CORNERS.

Followed by an ACCOUNT of the Great Fire of May 24 and 25, 1939, which has rendered homeless and penniless 2000 people.

In the south-east corner of what, for the last twenty-one years has been the Independent Republic of Estonia, is the Province of Petseri (Petserimaa). The area of Estonia is about 18,371 square miles, and the area of Petseri Province about 711 square miles.

The district, its history, and inhabitants, and many of its possessions are absolutely unique, and in spite of its varying fortunes through the centuries, is unspoiled and natural, an achievement in these days of extensive tourism.

In the year 862, according to Nestor the Russian chronicler, the people of what is now Russia were in need of a ruler. So they sent an invitation to three Scandinavian Dukes of the House of Russ, saying: "Our land is rich and vast, but there is no order in it. Will you come and govern our country?" The three brothers, Sineus, Rurik and Truvor accepted the invitation, and Truvor set up his headquarters at Irboska, some four or five miles from Petseri, the county-town.

In the thirteenth century the Bishop of Riga, local head of the German Order of Knights of the Sword, began his campaign of conquest in Estonia. In these days Petseri was under the government of the Russian Province of Pskov. For this reason in this part of the country the Order came up against not the indigenous Estonians, but the Russians, and though they made many attempts they never gained a firm footing in the district. Petserimaa formed the most westerly province first of the Province of Pskov, and later of the Grand Duchy of Moscow.

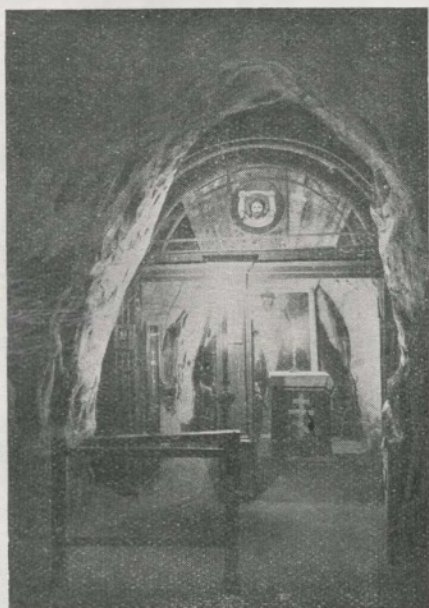
Under the influence of the Order the remainder of the country became Catholicised, and so was drawn under the influence of western culture. Petserimaa, however, has never been so affected, and to this day, even under the programme of development drawn up by the modern State, the effect of this long association is still prominently visible.

During the seven centuries 1219 to 1918 Estonia fell under the domination of a succession of foreign rulers. First came the Danes followed by the Order of Knights, the Swedes, the Poles, the Swedes again, and the Russians. The last named were masters of the country from 1710 to 1918.

During the nineteenth century an Estonian nationalistic spirit began to develop, and from the middle of the century the leaders of this movement, were ever on the watch for the opportunity of



*The Courtyard*



*Chapel in Catacombs*



establishing national independence. The Estonians suffered severely when the 1905 Revolution failed.

When the Bolshevik Revolution broke out in 1917 the Estonian leaders realised that the time for which they had been waiting had arrived. On February 24, 1918, the present President of the Republic, M. Konstantin Päts, published the Declaration of Independence.

The Bolsheviks, however, were not willing to surrender so easily what had constituted the western seaboard of Czarist Russia, and for two years the Estonians kept up a terrific struggle against Soviet odds with von der Goltz and his Landeswehr thrown in.

The struggle ended on February 2nd, 1920, when the Treaty of Tartu was signed by the Soviet delegates, and the Estonian authorities.

One of the provisions of this treaty was the cession to Estonia by the Soviet, of part of the Province of Pskov... the part which is now the Province of Petseri.

It is thus, that one finds tucked away in this south-eastern corner a people quite unlike the rest of the Estonians in every way. Petserimaa constitutes a little world all of its own.

The inhabitants are known as "Setud", people of Estonian origin who have intermarried with Russians. They are simple peasants, illiterate, deeply religious and superstitious beyond belief. In religion they are Russian Orthodox, and fortunately for them, their priests are wise men with modern ideas, collaborating in every way with the Estonian authorities who are striving to raise them to the cultural standard of the rest of the country.

From the earliest times of the Estonian Government has given special care to the Setud. Men specially chosen for their ability in administration and education have been sent there. Their task has not been, and still is not, an easy one. But that progress although slow is sure, is proved by the fact that in 1920 almost all of the Setud were illiterate and in 1934 the percentage had dwindled to 35.3%. This seems to be a colossal figure still, but every effort is being made to decrease it, e. g. by the creation of fifty adult schools.

The Setu people live in small villages of wooden houses. The house consists generally of one room divided into two compartments. The outer compartment is used as a kind of store house in which all manner of things ranging from rye to rusty scythes are kept.

The inner compartment is the living-room, bedroom and kitchen combined. The windows are few and small, and permanently sealed against the rigours of a hard winter, a fact which gives rise to a Babel of smells.

The room is divided into two parts by a curtain behind which the parents sleep on a bed made of webbing. Benches run all the

way round the walls, and on these the children sleep. The grandparents, if living with their children, occupy the privileged and warmest place, a raised platform at the back of the fire-place, known as the "top of the stove".

One cannot describe the poverty of these simple yet courageous people, who year after year go on cultivating their poor strips of land, subsisting chiefly on rye bread. I have seen women ploughing, two harnessed to the front and pulling a most primitive contraption, while the third guided them. They were too poor to own a horse.

Petserimaa is also rich in folk-lore. The abundance of Estonian folk-lore is astounding, but in no part of the country can such rich treasure be found as among the Setud.

The Setu women still wear national costume. This is a long black dress with full white sleeves embroidered with red for holidays. Their breasts are covered with silver ornaments of all kinds, one woman often being laden with them to the extent of twelve pounds weight. For every day a long coat of white homespun linen is worn. This is also embroidered, and has two long embroidered "pigtails" hanging down the back. A white kerchief is worn on the head.

Petseri station is some kilometres from the town, but a leisurely and unusual drive can be made there by droshky. This introduces one immediately to the very special atmosphere of the place.

Presently one comes to the town, the county-town of Petserimaa. The older part of Petseri consists of small, one storied wooden houses, but the buildings erected since 1920, such as the branch of the Bank of Estonia, and other administrative buildings are of stone. The streets are narrow and cobbled, and almost all lead directly to, or run near, the market place. On market days this presents an exciting and picturesque scene. The Setu women in their costumes, with gleaming, jingling silver ornaments, the bearded men in their coloured Russian shirts, the assortment of wares, produce a sound picture once seen and heard never to be forgotten. And through it all comes the deep-throated clanging of the monastery bells.

But the centre of attraction is the monastery. This is absolutely unique as a building, and the Order which inhabits it is fast dying out, only one other community existing, and that in Finland.

On the edge of the town the River Kamenka flows through a deep valley on its way to Lake Pihkva. In the steep sandstone bank there was a small cave, which shortly after the Christianisation of Pskov was chosen by Mark the Hermit as his cell.

It was not long before he was joined by others and a small brotherhood came into being. These early monks excavated further into the hill-side, digging seven passages radiating from the cave. In these passages, which are seven hundred and fifty yards

long, they set up richly decorated altars, the remains of which can still be seen.

Here too, they buried their dead brethren. This custom has been continued down the ages and now more than five thousand coffins of monks and others have their last resting place in these catacombs.

From these small beginnings the monastery sprang, until in the Middle Ages it was not only a monastery but a formidable fortress, whose massive walls once withstood the siege of King Stephan Bathory of Poland.

One enters the monastery by a gateway, built of stone and white-washed, with a wooden gallery, green-roofed, about half-way up. From it rises a little tower with an arched roof of ultramarine, dusted with golden stars, above which rises a golden cupola surmounted by a triple cross. It is typical of the decoration of the whole monastery — dazzling white with splashes of brilliant colour.

Facing one, down an avenue of giant shady trees, is the famous Uspensky Cathedral. It was the first church to be built, in 1473, and has been dug into the sandstone of the hillside. A second story was built onto it in 1759 in the Russian baroque, complete with ultramarine cupolas. The interior of the church is faced with brick, and the vault supported by thirteen columns of brick-faced sandstone. It is one mass of gilt and colours and relics. It is not big, but has air of expansiveness. The fresco of the dome is a work of art.

"I wandered round from shrine to shrine. These consisted of pictures, crucifixes and groups of broken figures. They would have fetched little, I imagine, in a commission shop. But to the peasants, and to the priests also, perhaps, they provide straws at which to clutch in an otherwise puzzling world. One or two peasants came in, and did the round of shrines, kneeling before one here, and touching the ground with the forehead, kissing a picture there or the foot of a figure... The peasants did it with an air of simple devoutness."<sup>1)</sup>

To the left is the belfry, with its green roof carrying thirteen bells. The entrance to the catacombs is also here. Not far away is the red and white library and treasure house containing many wonderful copes and other vestments, and a number of invaluable relics, gifts of Ivan the Terrible, and other Russian rulers.

The massive walls which surround the monastery were built between 1558 and 1565. They are intersected at intervals by massive round and square towers, which were formerly surmounted by pointed wooden roofs. The roofs were destroyed by fire in 1688,

<sup>1)</sup> „BALTIC CORNER“ by Ronald Seth (Methuen) p. 79.





*Once a Street*



*Salvage*

and since, after the Great Northern War the monastery lost its use as a fortress, one sees still their charred remains.

Petseri is an experience, and if you ever come this way, you should let nothing deter you from visiting it. The people, though poor beyond realisation, in normal times are happy, and Petseri is a happy place.

### THE GREAT FIRE.

May 24, 25, 1939.

But now Petseri is a town of indescribable sadness. Dazed people walk among the charred ruins of what only a week ago were their homes. They cannot yet realise what has happened to them. Yet 2000 out of 4,500 inhabitants of Petseri town are homeless, penniless and possessionless.

A short time before noon on Wednesday May 24, a twenty eight year old Setu, by name Alexander Tereshihin, was involved in a violent quarrel with his mother. He had been out of prison since January, when he had finished a term of imprisonment for forging his mother's signature on a bill of exchange.

Even at so early an hour Tereshihin was not sober. The quarrel came to an end by the man leaving the house and going to a small hut in the little garden.

At 11.40 it was seen that the hut was on fire. Tereshihin was got safely out, but before the fire could be extinguished it had spread to the house. The houses of Petseri, as I have previously said, were built of wood, and even the stone houses had wooden-slat roofs. They were old, and there had been a long period of dry weather.

A north-east wind, 8 to 9 balls, was blowing at the time and in a very few minutes five streets were blazing. The alarm was given, and the terrified people were dragging what few belongings they could into the streets, where later even they were caught by the fire.

In a short time sixteen fire-engines from South Estonia were hurrying to Petseri. The Chief of the Tallinn Fire Services left Tallinn at 2.30, by air and reached Petseri at five o'clock. But he saw that nothing could be done to save the blazing houses.

He gave orders for limiting the fire's progress, and this was accomplished by the 1500 firemen who had arrived on the scene.

All through the night the fire raged, and when at last the fury of the flames had died down:

212 houses, 22 small farms, 2 banks, 2 restaurants, the town administrative buildings, the three libraries, an hotel, a cinema, a wine store, the fire depôt, a slaughter house with contents



had been destroyed,

a man and a woman killed, eight dangerously injured, 2000 people were homeless, clotheless, possessionless

and

£ 250,000 worth of damage had been caused.

It is impossible to describe the scene, the terrible sight of the dazed and bewildered victims, who though poor to start with, had lost their homes and what poor personal possessions they had.

A wave of horror and pity swept over the whole nation, and everything which can be done, has been done.

BUT IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO PUT THINGS TO RIGHTS.

This appeal is not eloquent, but I hope by its very simplicity it will touch your hearts, and that your response to help these poor people of a courageous, small and friendly nation will be generous.

PLEASE SEND ME YOUR DONATIONS WITHOUT DELAY.



